

# Improving Memory

By Diane Trautman

Do you know how memory works? Do you want to avoid forgetting information you have memorized? How confident are you that you can retain what you have committed to memory?

Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia, gives us three basic principles and some tools to help children and adults, improve their memory in a fascinating article entitled “What Will Improve a Student’s Memory”, *American Educator* (Winter 2008-2009). The full article can be read at [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/winter08\\_09/willingham.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter08_09/willingham.pdf)

The first principle is that *memories are formed as the residue of thought*. We remember what we think about. Merely re-reading notes or cramming won’t suffice. Students must ask questions as they read. Why is a statement of fact true and why it is relevant to the discussion? Techniques such as outlining and diagramming help students learn to explore ideas and the ways in which they’re related.

Experts tell us that the mode in which information is received — visual, oral, experiential, etc., is less important than the meaning we attach to the information and the amount of time we ponder it. Therefore, students should study early and often and they should study at different times to avoid associating the memories with a particular time of day. To ensure retention, students should continue to study even after they think they’re fully prepared.

The second principle is that *memories are inaccessible mostly due to missing or ambiguous cues*. Though memories may fade with time, the biggest reason we can’t recall information is that we haven’t developed detailed and distinctive cues that enable us to easily locate the specific information in our memories. When students understand the main ideas, supporting information and the connections they can readily recall the points at test time. To memorize information that has no meaningful connection, cues can be created using acronyms, acrostics, music, rhymes and other mnemonic devices.

The third principle is that *people tend to think their learning is more complete than it really is*. Children and adults often overestimate the amount of knowledge they have amassed in their memories. The best way to assure you have retained information is by testing yourself and having other people test you. When you can explain something to someone else, then you’ve learned it.

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